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ABSTRACT

This paper intersperses events and experiences from the poet Nikki Giovanni's life--she emerged from the Black Rights Movement in the late 1960s--with student assignments in prereading, reading, discussion, and writing about Giovanni's poetry, specifically the poem "Nikki-Rosa." In addition, the paper describes an oral history project and a formal writing assignment which use the poem as a starting point. The paper also discusses Giovanni's essay "On Being Asked What It's Like to Be Black," and another of her poems, "Knoxville, Tennessee," which was about her beloved home town. An assignment suggested in the paper asks students to write a poem of their own about something, someplace, or someone they like best; several student poems illustrate the assignment. The final Nikki Giovanni poem discussed in the paper is "Revolutionary Dreams," a poem in which the poet explores the development of her thinking in ways that help students see how changing your mind need not invalidate the authenticity of what has been said and written earlier. (NKA)

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ED 429 290

Teaching the Works of Nikki Giovanni
"the same ol danger but a brand new pleasure"

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When her poetry first emerged from the Black Rights Movement in the late 1960s, Nikki Giovanni became almost at once a celebrated and controversial voice for her times. Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1943, named Yolande Cornelia Giovanni Jr., she was one of the first black poets to achieve stardom. *Black Feeling, Black Talk,* her first book, is a slim volume of revolutionary poems full of passion, anger, frustration, and love. Giovanni wrote these poems while enrolled in Columbia's Master of Fine Arts program. One of the purposes of the program was to publish a book. Giovanni completed *Black Feeling, Black Talk*, published it, and then dropped out of the program, figuring that she had fulfilled the program's requirements.

In an interview for *Writer's Digest* (February, 1989), Nikki Giovanni describes her Cinderella story:

> To get publicity for *Black Feeling, Black Talk*, I got the idea to have a book party at Birdland because I love jazz. I went to see Harold Logan, who was the manager, and said, "Hi, I'm Nikki Giovanni. I'm a poet, and I have a new book, and I'd love to have a book party at Birdland. I know you're dead on Sundays, so that would be a good day. What do I have to do to have a party here?"
>
> He looked at me like I was crazy, but he finally said, "I'll tell you what. You bring me 125 people and you can have the club. But if you bring me 124 people or any less, you owe me $500."
>
> I said, "Fine," but afterward I thought how would I get $500 if I failed. That was a huge amount of money for me in 1969.

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Anyway, I make up invitations and sent them out to all sorts of groups and that cost me a couple of hundred dollars to start. Then I contacted radio stations and asked if I could go on the air to talk about my book party. I figured the midnight audiences are full of readers, so I did a lot of late night shows. I did everything I could do free to ask people to come to Birdland for my book party. I even asked friends like Morgan Freeman, who was a young actor at the time to read from my book and we'd have a kind of Sunday cabaret.

I ended up with a crowd at Birdland that snaked all the way down the street and turned the corner. Birdland is right in the backyard of *The New York Times,* so some reporters happened to look out the window and wondered what the crowd was all about, and came down to investigate. When they found out everyone was there for a poetry reading, they knew they had a story.

The New York Times took a picture of me, which wound up on the front page of the metro section and, because of the publicity, I sold 10,000 books in the next eight months and attracted the attention of some major publishers.

If this sounds like a Cinderella story, remember I made my own slipper. I'm a Midwesterner. I was raised in Cincinnati, and one of the things I think Midwesterners do very well is work hard. We don't expect magic; we make magic.

Between 1967 and 1970, Giovanni published three books of poetry that achieved wide readership among the black community: *Black Feeling* (1967), *Black Judgment* (1968), *Re: Creation* (1970). These early poems are cultural artifacts of those troubled times. The boldness of her revolutionary proclamations and the accessibility of her poems made these volumes big hits on the poetry charts. Displaying not only an entrepreneurial spirit but also a keen awareness of the Black Aesthetic claim that poetry cannot be divorced from music in the African American tradition, Giovanni made several albums of her poetry read in musical settings, some with religious choirs, others with jazz musicians.

But by the early 1970s, what Arthur P. Davis called the "new poetry of black hate" had exhausted its market. At the same time, the subject matter for Nikki Giovanni's poetry began to broaden. In 1972, she produced an electric collection of love poems called *My House* which was followed by *The Women and the Men* in 1974. Both brought her critical acclaim and remain in print as single volumes, remarkable testimony to the enduring attraction of these poems to readers.

One of Giovanni's early poems, "Nikki-Rosa," foreshadows the themes that animate the best of her work both early and late. In it, Giovanni describes specific moments from her own childhood. But the images she recalls for the reader are more than biographical details; they are evidence to support her premise that growing up black doesn't always mean growing up "hard." Life and art really do intersect.

Nikki-Rosa

childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you're Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have your
mother
all to yourself and
how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in
and somehow when you talk about home
it never gets across how much you
understood their feelings
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
and even though you remember
your biographers never understand
your father's pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together
and you and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmasses
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quiet happy

Prereading

Before reading "Nikki-Rosa," ask students to describe what they envision when they say or hear that someone has had a "hard childhood." Create a cluster on the board of all the features of this condition from your students' point of view.

Then ask students to think about some of the things they experienced as children that someone might feel sorry for them about but that were actually pleasurable. Students are likely to recall having to share a bed with a sibling where there was plenty of squabbling over space but also many sweet secrets shared. Or a student might remember weekly chores like ironing her father's shirts which, though she would never admit it to her mother, made her feel closer to her dad. Students might offer memories of hand-me-down clothes, errands to the store, or left-over dinners. Make a list of these on the board and title them "Childhood Remembrances." Save this list.

Reading

Read "Nikki-Rosa" aloud to students and then ask them to read it again to themselves silently. When you feel certain students have done this, have them read the poem a third time, underlining or highlighting all the words and phrases that describe the various pleasures the speaker in the poem remembers experiencing in her "hard" childhood.

Remind students that while this poem may seem to be obviously autobiographical — the title is reasonably strong evidence — a careful reader always considers the speaker in a poem to be separate from the author.

Discussion

To initiate a discussion of this poem, you might want to ask students the following questions. Encourage the discussion to roam where it will, rather than sticking to this list. Requiring students to answer these questions (in complete sentences) will probably make them hate the poem forever.

- Did any of the phrases you marked in "Nikki-Rosa" remind you of your own childhood experiences? How did that make you feel about what you read?
- How would you describe the speaker's attitude towards her childhood? Why do you think she is worried that a biographer will "never understand"?
- What do you think you "understand" about the circumstances of the speaker's childhood? Push students to be very specific here in order to help them recreate the world in which these childhood remembrances existed.

• Why do you think Nikki Giovanni chooses to address the reader directly as "you?" What effect did this have on you as a reader? What assumption does this use of the second person make about Giovanni's expectation of who her readers will be?
• How did you interpret the line "And though you're poor it isn't poverty that / concerns you"? If it wasn't poverty that concerned the speaker, what was it that concerned her? (I think it is the *joi de vivre* that has always animated Nikki Giovanni as a child, as an adult, and as a poet; but that is only one reader's response and not necessarily what your students will read into this line.)

Potential minefields

The line "and I hope no white person ever has cause / to write about me / because they never understand" might cause some students to feel that Nikki Giovanni is casting them as the bad guys in this poem. Encourage students to think about how Nikki Giovanni's experience as a black person might lead her to make this generalization about white people. Discourage students from relegating such generalizations to the bad old days before the Civil Rights movement. If the issue comes up, it is important to discuss the pervasive presence of racism in our own society and how this plays out today in terms of generalizations about who we expect to "understand" us and who we expect never will.

Writing

Gathering material: Bring out the list of childhood remembrances that students compiled as a class and ask them to take out a piece of paper and make a list that is uniquely theirs. Let students know that no one need ever see this list and that they should simply try to record as many occurrences from their childhood that they can remember, both important and seemingly inconsequential.

Talk as prewriting: Put students into pairs and have them take turns imagining that they are biographers conducting an interview with a famous person in order to write a book about this person's life. This particular interview should focus on childhood remembrances. When the first interview is complete, students should reverse roles.

Before they begin, make sure students understand exactly what a biography is. For students with limited experience of the genre, borrow an armload of biographies from the school library and let students browse. They need to see the kind of detail biographers include when writing about a famous person's life. If your students are like mine, biographies of sports

figures, rock stars, and celebrities like Selena will get their attention more readily than *The Life of Amelia Earhart.*

Writing to explore an idea: Have students imagine that they are back home following the interview with their biographers. Ask them to write a diary entry for the day describing how they felt about being interviewed and what they hoped their biographer "understood" about the childhood remembrances they described. Suggest that students make references to Nikki Giovanni's poem "Nikki-Rosa" in their diary entry if it seems appropriate.

An Oral History Project: Now that students have some familiarity with the interview process, brainstorm a list of adults they might like to interview about childhood memories. When everyone has a person in mind, create a list of questions that students could ask. Effective interview questions should be invitations for the person being interviewed to muse on his or her experiences, not yes/no or fill-in-the-blank questions. I have listed a few to seed students' thinking, but urge you to have students come up with their own. Given that students will be the ones asking the questions, it is vital that they be written in the their own words.

- What do you remember most about your childhood?
- Why do you think this memory has stayed with you?
- What places come to mind when you think about being a kid?
- What people?

If the technology is available, have students tape the interviews and then play them for one another to identify the most evocative details. These will then become the idea seeds for a poem which demonstrates how life and art intersect.

Formal writing assignment: Ask students to select particularly revealing and interesting details from their interviews and then to tease these words and phrasings into a poem. Their drafts may take the form of a story poem in which the writer describes an event from beginning to end. They may also imitate "Nikki-Rosa" and use a series of moments to create a picture of childhood. When students are satisfied with their drafts, have them turn to partners for help with revision. If possible, suggest that students show this draft to the person they interviewed to see if it is true to what they were told. Encourage students to type their poems and present a polished copy to the adult whose history they have tapped.

Autobiography as Art

Nikki Giovanni's essay "On Being Asked What It's Like to Be Black," first appeared in 1969 in *US* and was later reprinted in *Gemini: An*

Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet. Here Giovanni employs a different genre to explore the themes of "Nikki-Rosa." As this essay written when she was twenty-five years old demonstrates, Giovanni was outspoken from the start. It also foreshadows the extraordinary lady she has become.

> I've always known I was colored. When I was a Negro I knew I was colored; now that I'm Black I know which color it is. Any identity crisis I may have had never centered on race. I love those long, involved, big-worded essays on "How I Discovered My Blackness" in twenty-five words more or less which generally appear in some mass magazine—always somehow smelling like Coke or Kellogg's corn flakes—the prize for the best essay being a brass knuckle up your head or behind, if you make any distinction between the two.

The article goes on to describe her family history and the kind of people who Giovanni feels helped to make her who she is.

> Now, Mommy was an intellectual, aristocratic woman, which in her time was not at all fashionable. She read, liked paintings, played tennis and liked to party a great deal. Had she been rich she would have followed the sun—going places, learning things and being just generally unable to hold a job and be useful. But Mommy made just one bad mistake in the scheme of things—she sashayed across the Knoxville College campus, hair swinging down to her behind, most probably carrying a tennis racket, and ran into a shin-head Negro with a pretty suit on. He, being warm and friendly and definitely looking for a city girl to roost with, introduced himself. I have always thought that if his name hadn't been exotic she would never have given him a second thought; but Grandfather, whom my mother was so much like, had a weakness for Romance languages and here comes this smiling dude with Giovanni for a name. Mommy decided to take him home.

In the final paragraph, Giovanni explains:

> I was trained intellectually and spiritually to respect myself and the people who respected me. I was emotionally trained to love those who love me. If such a thing can be, I was trained to be in power—that is, to learn and act upon necessary emotions which will grant me more control over my life. Sometimes it's a painful thing to make decisions based on our training, but if we are properly trained we do. I consider this a good. My life is not all it will be. There is a real possibility that I can be the first person in my family

to be free. That would make me happy. I'm twenty-five years old. A revolutionary poet. I love.

Turning Students' Own Lives Into Art

Though born in Knoxville, Tennessee, Nikki Giovanni's family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, shortly thereafter. Giovanni returned to her birthplace often and spent most summers and holidays with her grandparents and extended family. As this poem demonstrates so beautifully, wherever she traveled, Knoxville remained her true home.

Knoxville, Tennessee

I always like summer
best
you can eat fresh corn
from daddy's garden
and okra
and greens
and cabbage
and lots of
barbecue
and buttermilk
and homemade ice-cream

at the church picnic
and listen to gospel music
outside
at the church
homecoming
and go to the mountains with
your grandmother
and go barefooted
and be warm
all the time
not only when you go to bed
and sleep

After reading this poem aloud, I ask students what they can tell about the speaker from the things Giovanni has chosen to list as what she likes best. Invariably students identify the speaker as black and from the country. I push them to think about what they can tell from the poem about her attitudes, about what they think might be her priorities in life.

I then invite students to write a poem of their own about something, someplace, or someone they like best. My instructions are intentionally vague though I suggest that they use short lines and imitate the list-like quality of Giovanni's poem. Students soon find that they like this technique very much indeed. With very few words they can produce a page full of poetry. I remind them that in order for their poem to replicate the power of Giovanni's poem, their few words must be exceptionally well-chosen.

As students share their poems with the class, we talk about how it feels to use details from their own lives as raw material for their art. Though at first some think I go too far to equate what they have written with what "real poets" create, the more we look for distinctions between their best work and published poetry, the more their objections subside. Life and art intersect in the classroom as well as on stage or in a published volume. Witness their work:

917 Kings Road

I always liked grandma
best
you can bathe
in her thick love
and borscht
and babka
and blintzes
and lots of
homemade pickles
sultry stews
and super sweets

at the dinner table
and listen to Russian radio
inside
where it is always warm
on the couch
and be lost in papa
as he strums his guitar
plays his voice
sings his memories
of how he always
liked grandma
best

Edward Brodsky

I have no idea why so many students chose to center their poems on the page, but they did, this one to form a Christmas tree:

LA, California

I
always love
Christmas time best.
You go out with your family
Looking for the perfect tree. Coming home
an decorating it,
and watching it grow even more
beautiful as each decoration is added. Waiting for
the special moment when the lights come on. Fascinated with
all the new colors in
the room: red, green, blue, silver.
Going to sleep at nine so I could wake up to
hide the presents before the family wakes up. Anxious
to know what is
under the tree for me. Thanking God over
and over for giving me another Christmas with the
people
I love.

Angelin Rahnavardan

I always like winter
best
when it is really cold
and I drink hot chocolate
with cream
and sugar
and a little bit of honey

I love when it snows
I go outside
and have a snowfight
with my friends
go skiing
It is the only time
when hiding under
grandma's brown blanket
with a cup of hot tea
feels good and warm

and sleepy

Farzad Nikmanesh

I always love writing music
Best
Walking to the corner market
And a melody
Pops into my body
And I race home
Singing out loud
Forgetting about the Bisquick
Running into my room
And putting chords down

Sometimes sitting on my bed
Playing the same thing
Over and over
And over
Squeezing out life from a half dead tune

Jammin in Zack's garage
With the amps at eleven
And we're funky
And we're grooving
And then we take
The groove to
The Roxy
Or the Troubadour
Or an all-girls school dance

And afterwards some people are impressed
And afterwards some people say "that sucked"
And afterwards I am impressed
And afterwards I way "that sucked"
And I get discouraged
And never want to write music again

But I'm always writing music
No matter where I am
Or who I'm with
Even if I'm with Susannah

I always like writing music
best

Alexi Glickman

Then of course there are the students who take an assignment like this one and run with it in a direction the teacher never imagined:

I always like it when I see a pretty girl
You can look at her body
and smile
and legs
and breasts
And her beautiful hair that just makes
You want to go over and start making love to her.

When I meet a girl
I always put a new piece of gum in my mouth
I tell her what she wants to hear
even if it's not completely
true
I give her a few compliments
so she feels special
And after that
As long as she doesn't think you're ugly
you're in there
if you know what
I mean

Tony Gallo

There is no doubt in my mind that these 17-year-olds understand how life and art can intersect. Nikki Giovanni's simple celebration of the things that she likes best inspired them to look inside their own lives for poetic possibilities.

The Evolution of the Artist

Toward the end of her militant period, Nikki Giovanni wrote "Revolutionary Dreams." In this poem she explores the development of her thinking in ways that help students see how changing one's mind need not invalidate the authenticity of what has been said and written earlier. In fact, it shows growth.

Revolutionary Dreams

i used to dream militant
dreams of taking
over america to show
these white folks how it should be
done
i used to dream radical dreams
of blowing everyone away with my perceptive powers
of correct analysis
i even used to think i'd be the one
to stop the riot and negotiate the peace
then i awoke and dug
that if I dreamed natural
dreams of being a natural
woman doing what a woman
does when she's natural
i would have a revolution

Nikki Giovanni

Like much of Giovanni's later poetry, "Revolutionary Dreams" continues to advocate change, but views revolution as a personal rather than a collective movement. She has said that "the fight in the world today is the fight to be an individual."

Further Resources

• Artist Larry Johnson has illustrated "Knoxville, Tennessee," and the collaborative work of poet and painter has been published by Scholastic as a children's picture book (ISBN 0-590-47074-4).

• For more information about Nikki Giovanni's place within the tradition of African American literature, see *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. The volume was first published in 1997. If your school library doesn't have it yet, they should.

• No formal biography of Nikki Giovanni has yet been published, but for students interested in learning more about her life, I would send them to Giovanni's own collection *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet.*